DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 905 PS 026 676

TITLE	Family Responsibilities: How Are They Shared in European Households?
INSTITUTION	European Union, Brussels (Belgium). EUROSTAT.
ISSN	ISSN-1024-4352
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Data Shop Eurostat, B.P. 453, L-2014, Luxembourg, Belgium; Tel: 352-4301-34624; Fax: 352-4301-34415 (Cat. No. CA-NK-97-005-EN-C).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	Statistics in Focus: Population and Social Conditions; n5 1997
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Caregivers; Child Rearing; Day Care; Employed Parents; Employed Women; Family Role; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Work Relationship; Foreign Countries; Homemakers; *Housework; Mothers; National Surveys; Parent Child Relationship; Spouses; Well Being
IDENTIFIERS	*Division of Labor (Household); Europe; European Community

ABSTRACT

This newsletter focuses on the division of family responsibilities in European households, which is based on results of the European Community Household Panel, a multi-dimensional survey covering several subjects, including demographic and employment characteristics. The survey was based on a questionnaire adapted by various national data collection units. The sample in the first phase of the survey, conducted in 1994, was 60,500 households totaling about 170,000 people in the 12 European Community member states. Since that time, Austria and Finland joined the project. The findings indicated that of women between 25 and 59 years of age, about one-third described themselves as "housewives," with numbers varying depending on the number of children in the household, the woman's educational level (see Figure 6: "housewives (aged 25-59) by level of education attained-1994"), and the prevailing family model in the society involved. Most women in this age group were economically active, with one-third of employed women working on a part-time basis. Child care remained the women's responsibility, with women who worked full-time spending much more time with their children than men do. It was primarily in Denmark and the Netherlands that women benefited most from help from their partners. (KB)

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ISSN 1024-4352

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M Domzalska-Beck

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Family responsibilities - how are they shared in European households?

Of the women aged between 25 and 59 living in the European Union, about a third describe themselves as "housewives". This situation varies depending on the number of children in the household, on the woman's level of education and on the prevailing family model in the society concerned.

Most women in this age group are nevertheless economically active, and are therefore likely to have to reconcile their professional and family lives. Part-time work is one of the possible solutions; it applies to a third of the women in employment in the Community, but varies strongly from one Member State to another. Another possibility, of course, is help from their partner. However, according to the observations drawn from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) survey, child-care remains in the woman's domain. Women who work full-time spend much more time with their children than men do. It would seem that it is mainly in Denmark and the Netherlands that women benefit most from help from their partners.

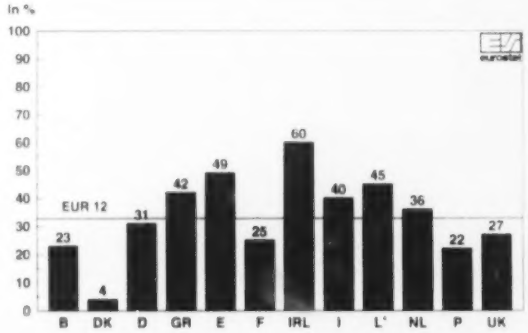
HOUSEWIVES

Amongst the twelve Members States of the Community in 1994, 33% of the female population aged between 25 and 59 described themselves as "housewives" (for more information on this term, see the notes on page 8). Amongst men, this situation is almost non-existent (0.8% of the population in this age group describe themselves in similar terms).

It is in Ireland where the highest percentage of women aged between 25 and 59 are housewives (60%). In Spain, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg, this proportion is also high, exceeding 40%. In Denmark, on the other hand, it only applies to 4% of women in this age group. (Figure 1)

Cultural factors always play an important role in a woman's decision to stay at home. Socio-economic factors such as the financial need to work, the situation of the job market, the possibility of working part-time, the availability of child-care facilities, etc. also play a decisive role.

Figure 1:
Housewives amongst all woman aged between 25 and 59 - 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994

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Manuscript completed on = 25.02.1997

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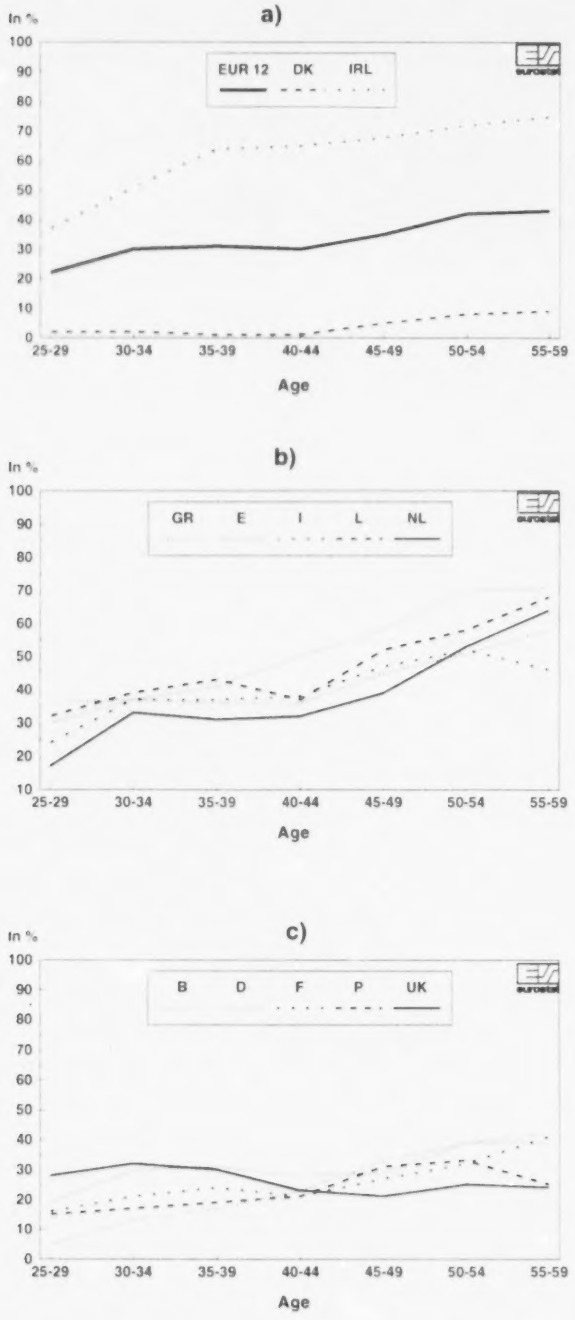
PS

Price (excl. VAT) in Luxembourg:Subscription 'Statistics in focus' of all themes: ECU 310
Subscription 'Statistics in focus' of Theme 2 'Population and social conditions': ECU 85
Single copy: ECU 6

Catalogue number: CA-NK-97-005-EN-C

The proportion of housewives for each age group varies considerably between the countries of the European Union.

Figure 2:
Housewives as a proportion of the female population, by age group - 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994

Graph 2a shows the European average compared with the most extreme cases: that of Denmark (where women who stay at home are so few that the analysis is unreliable) and that of Ireland.

In Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Greece, Spain and Italy, the different percentages of housewives are very close to one another, particularly for the 30-34 and 35-39 age groups. (Figure 2b)

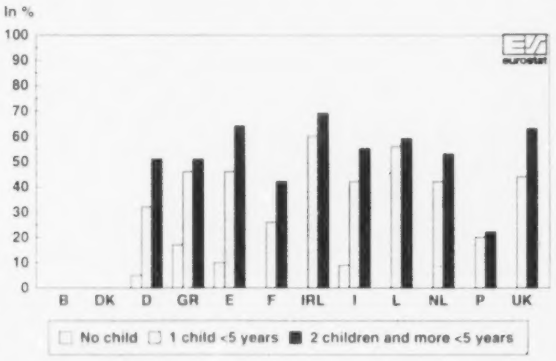
Graph 2c shows that Portugal differs from other countries in the South of Europe in that the percentage of housewives is relatively low; the activity rate amongst women is quite high. It also shows the particular case of the United Kingdom, where it seems that women aged 35-40 and over tend to resume work. This tendency is also shared by France, Germany and Luxembourg.

However, in most countries, after the age of 40, the number of women at home increases. This could be the result of a combination of factors: on the one hand, women who have never been in employment (which was more frequent in the past), on the other hand women who stopped their employment when they had children, and who subsequently do not wish to find a job or are unable to do so, etc.

The number and age of **children** has an obvious influence on whether a woman is economically inactive.

It is indeed noticeable that the percentage of housewives amongst the female population increases with the number of children. If we consider European women aged between 25 and 39, barely 6% of women without children stay at home, as opposed to 36% of women with one child under the age of 5, and 52% of those who have at least two children in this age group (Figure 3).

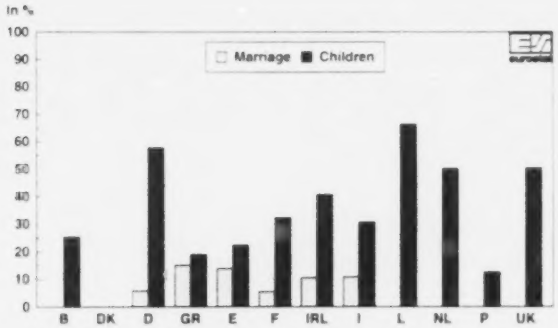
Figure 3:
Housewives aged between 25 and 39 according to the number of children under the age of 5 - 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994

From the answers to the question "Why did you stop working in your last job?", it appears that children are for women one of the main reasons why they ***stop working***. We should clarify that only those persons who stopped working after 1980 were asked this question. (Figure 4)

Figure 4:
Marriage, children, and cessation of employment amongst housewives (aged 25-59) - 1994



Note: The question was put exclusively to those persons who stopped working after 1980
Source: ECHP, 1994

Marriage is the reason why 15% of Greek women and 14% of Spanish ones stopped their employment; the average in Europe is 7%.

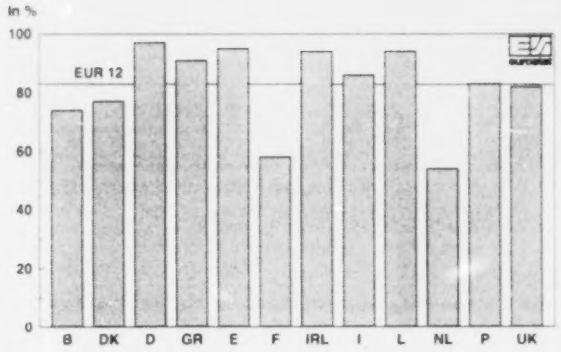
Children, on the other hand, are the most frequently cited reason at Community level (42%), and in Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (over 50%).

Other reasons mentioned are breach of contract by employer (10% of responses at Community level), the non-renewal of a contract (8%) and health (8%).

Family obligations (household chores, child-care and/or caring for other people) are for 84% of housewives the main reason why they are ***not looking for employment*** (Figure 5). The other reasons mentioned are ill-health (6%) and fear of not finding a job (2%).

France and the Netherlands are the countries where family obligations are mentioned the least often (even if percentages remain high) and where health problems are most frequently cited.

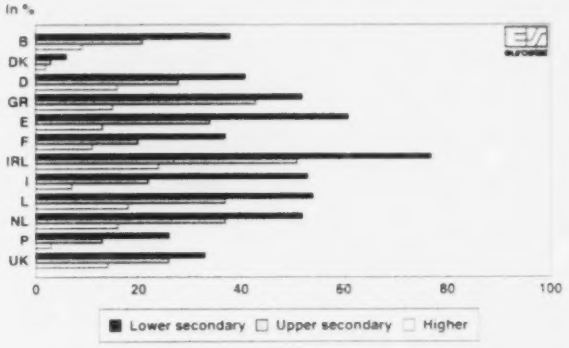
Figure 5:
Family obligations as a reason why housewives (aged 25 -59) are not looking for employment - 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994

The statistical data clearly show that becoming a housewife is strongly correlated with the **level of education**. (Figure 6)

Figure 6:
Housewives (aged 25-59) by level of education attained - 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994

Amongst the twelve members of the Union, housewives represent 45% of women aged 25 to 59 with a "lower secondary" level of education, 26% of those with an "upper secondary" level, and only 13% of those with higher education.

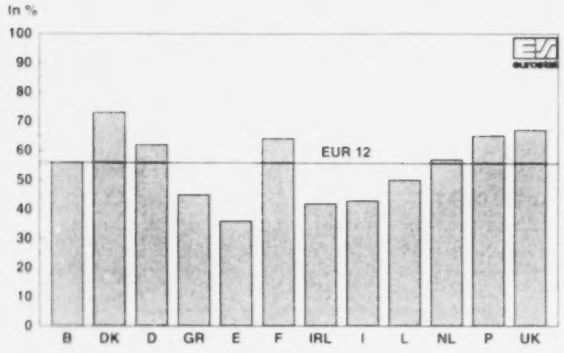
There are strong variations from one country to another. But when these variations are compared with the percentage of housewives (Figure 1), it would appear that there is an important structural effect at play: the lower the percentage of housewives, for instance in Denmark, the smaller the influence of the level of education becomes. In Portugal and Italy, the level of studies achieved seems to be the determining factor.

RECONCILING PROFESSIONAL AND FAMILY LIVES

The employment rate amongst the female population is always increasing steadily amongst Member States. For women aged between 25 and 59, it rose from 50% in 1987 to 56% in 1994, at Community level. For their male counterparts, the tendency is rather downwards (from 85% to 83% respectively).

Contrary to the case of men, the employment rate of women varies widely from one country to another. It is higher in Denmark (73%) and the United Kingdom (67%), but it does not exceed 50% in Spain, Greece, Italy, Ireland and Luxembourg. (Figure 7)

Figure 7:
Employment rate amongst women aged between 25 and 59 - 1994



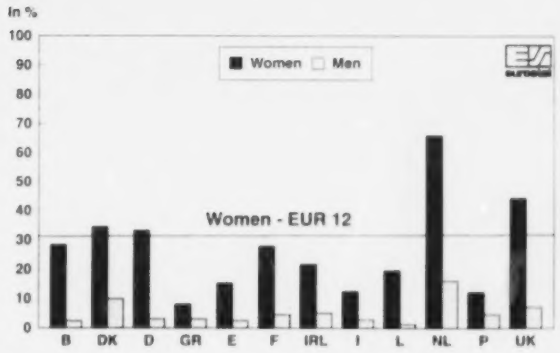
Source: Labour Force Survey, 1994

Part-time work

For parents wishing to work, but who would also like to devote as much time as possible to their family (in particular to their children's education), working part-time can be a solution.

In 1994, amongst the twelve Member States, part-time work was mostly carried out by women. It is most widespread in the Netherlands (66% of female employment) and in the United Kingdom (44%), and less frequent in Greece (8%), in Italy and in Portugal (12%). (Figure 8)

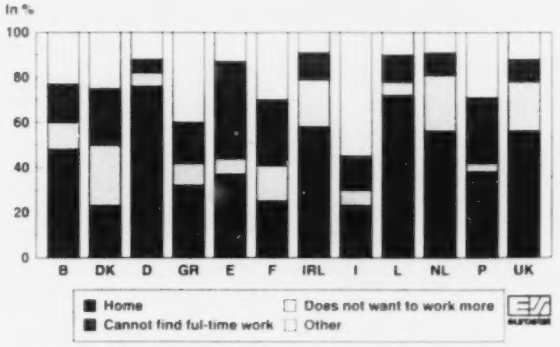
Figure 8 :
Share of part-time work within overall employment - 1994



Source: Labour Force Survey, 1994

According to the results of the Panel, the decision to work part-time is often explained by the need to stay at home.

Figure 9:
Reasons for working part-time* amongst women aged between 25 and 59 - 1994



* less than 20 hours per week
Source: ECHP, 1994

At Community level, 55% of women working part-time mention family obligations as the main determining factor for this type of work. This proportion is 76% for German women and 72% for those in Luxembourg. (Figure 9)

Child-care

In families where both parents are in employment for a minimum of 30 hours per week and where there are children under the age of 16, 77% of women and 50% men claim that they look after them on a daily basis.

In all the countries, mothers look after children much more than fathers. This is particularly noticeable in Greece, Portugal, Luxembourg, Ireland, Italy and Spain. On the other hand, the difference is least marked in Denmark and the Netherlands. (Figure 10a)

The differences in the amount of time that mothers and fathers devote to children is equally strong. Of the persons who state that they look after children, 32% of men and 6% of women spend fewer than 2 hours per day looking after them, while 69% of women and 27% of men look after them for over 4 hours per day. This phenomenon can be observed in all Member States.

The percentage of parents who work and look after their ***young children*** is naturally higher than that for children in general (aged 0-16), but the differences between the behaviour of fathers and that of mothers remain clear (Figure 10b).

The distribution of hours spent looking after children under the age of 5 is also similar to the number of hours spent looking after children in general. 80% of women look after their young children at least 4 hours per day, as opposed to 32% of men.

Again, it is in Denmark and the Netherlands where women can count most on the help of their partner when looking after children.

Figure 10a:
Child care for under 16-year olds by parents working at least 30 hours per week - 1994

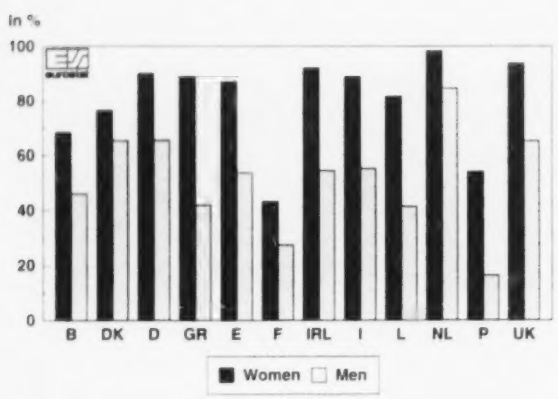
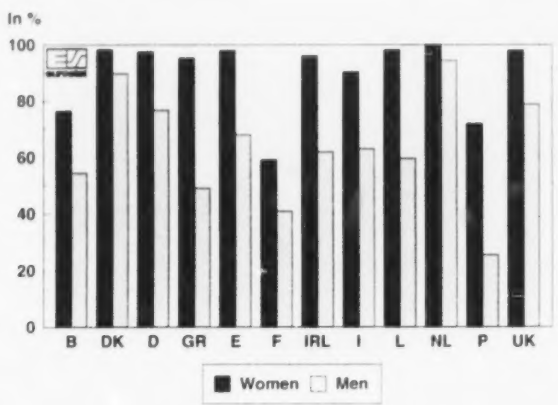
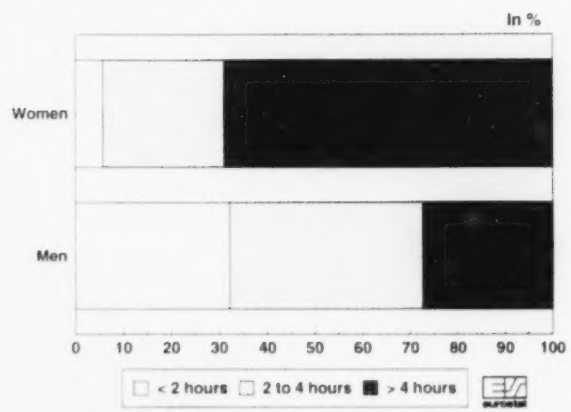


Figure 10b:
Child-care for children under the age of 5 by parents working at least 30 hours per week - 1994

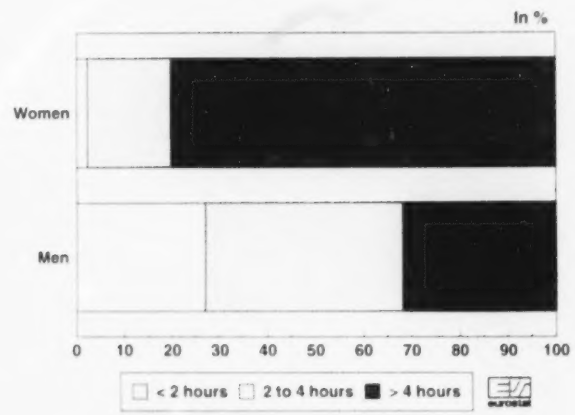


Time spent with them per day - EUR 12



Source: ECHP, 1994

Time spent with them per day - EUR 12

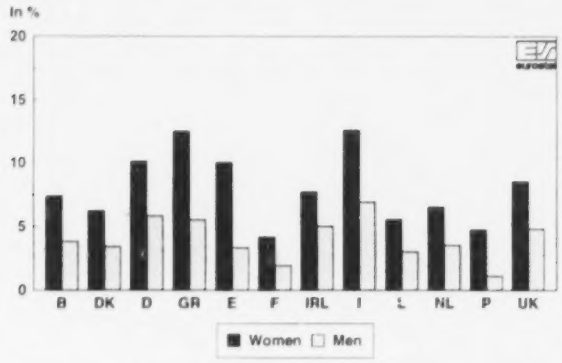


Source: ECHP, 1994

Help from "grandparents"

At Community level, 14% of women and 7% of men aged over 50 say that they look after children for free. This is likely to consist mostly of grandparents looking after their grandchildren. (Figure 11)

Figure 11:
Free child-care by people aged over 50 - 1994

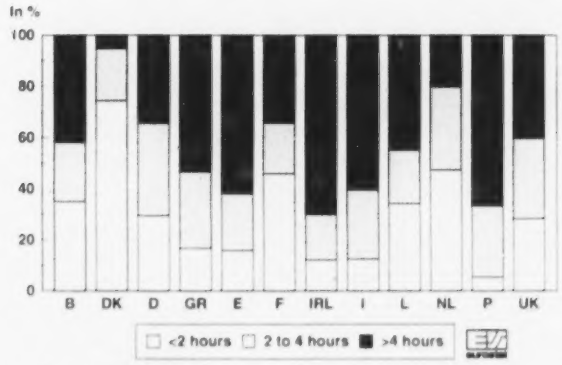


Source: ECHP, 1994

In Italy and in Greece, 29% and 25% respectively of women aged over 50 say that they look after children. The figure also exceeds the Community average in Belgium and the Netherlands. On the other hand, it is very low in Denmark (5%).

In all Member States, amongst people aged over 50, more women than men look after children. This difference is most noticeable in southern Europe and Ireland. These are also the countries where women looking after children devote most time to them. (Figure 12)

Figure 12:
Time devoted per day by women aged over 50 to looking after children - 1994



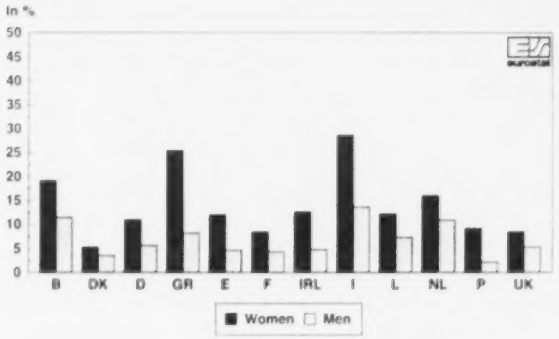
Source: ECHP, 1994

Looking after other people

Just as with child-care, looking after other people, in particular family members who are elderly or ill, is mostly in the hands of women. If we consider people aged between 25 and 59 who are employed for at least 30 hours per week, 9% of European women and 5% of European men say that they devote part of their time to looking after other people. This predominance of women is visible in most countries. (Figure 13)

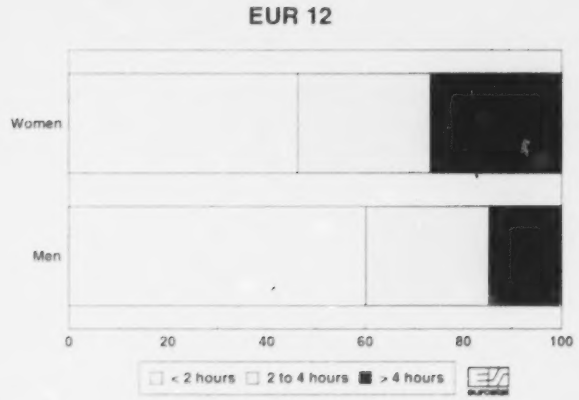
National differences are noticeable when comparing the proportion of persons looking after other members of the family (with the highest percentages in Greece and Italy) and the time devoted to this (the maximum being in Portugal). (Figure 14)

Figure 13:
Looking after "other people" amongst those in employment for at least 30 hours per week - 1994

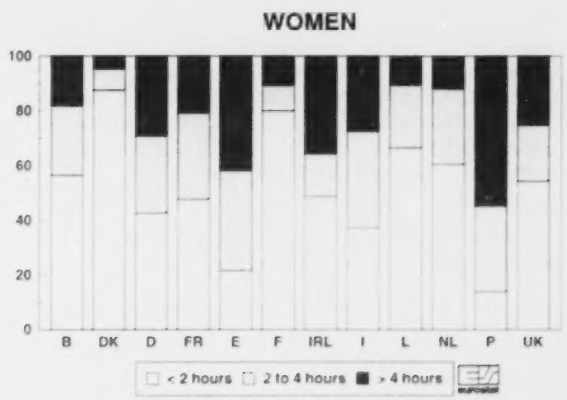


Source: ECHP, 1994

Figure 14:
Time spent every day looking after other people (for free) by those in employment for at least 30 hours per week - 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994



Source: ECHP, 1994

OPINIONS...

One of the questions in the ECHP concerned the level of general satisfaction with the main activity (employment, staying at home, being unemployed, studying, retirement).

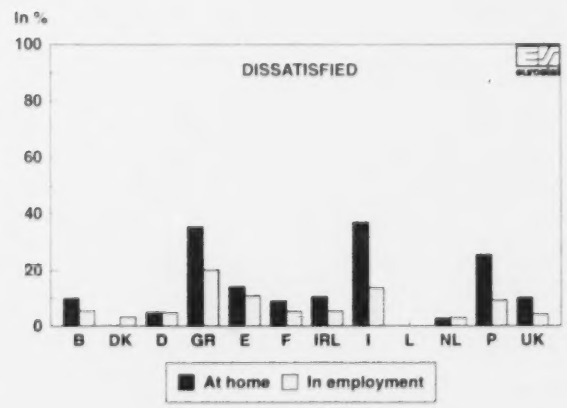
The difference of opinion between women in employment and those who look after the home is clear. At Community level, 7% of women who work at least 30 hours per week are dissatisfied; amongst housewives, this percentage rises to 16%. In some countries, the relative number of women who are unhappy is twice as high amongst housewives compared with those in employment (Figure 15).

In Italy and in Greece, more than one-third of housewives say they are unhappy about their situation; in Portugal, this figure is one-quarter.

On the other hand, in Denmark, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, over 60% of housewives say they are very satisfied to be so; in Germany, France and Ireland, this figure is 50% or higher.

Is it possible to see in these statements a reflection of different mentalities and of the fact that, depending on the country, being a housewife is a matter of choice or something that just happens to women? Or is it above all determined by the economic situation and the possibilities offered to parents to reconcile their professional and family lives?

Figure 15:
Satisfaction with the main activity amongst housewives and those in employment for at least 30 hours per week - 1994



Note: The ECHP used a satisfaction scale ranging from 1 to 6. Those who are dissatisfied are the ones who answered "1" or "2", those who are satisfied answered "5" or "6".
Source: ECHP, 1994

The European Community Household Panel is a multi-dimensional survey which covers several subjects: demographic and employment characteristics, income, health, education, housing, migration, etc. The structure of the panel makes it possible to follow up and interview the same people over several consecutive years. The survey is based on a harmonised questionnaire, the Community version of which was drawn up by Eurostat, and subsequently adapted by national data collection units depending on the institutional peculiarities of each country.

The first phase of the survey was carried out in 1994. The sample totalled some 60 500 households (about 170 000 people) in the twelve Member States at the time. Austria and Finland have joined the project since then.

EXPLANATORY NOTES:

Housewives: term employed to refer to women who, in answer to the question: "What is your main activity status?" replied "Doing housework, looking after children or other persons".

It should be added that 10% of these women (aged between 25 and 59) said that they had nevertheless carried out a few hours' work during the week before the interview. Although in most countries this percentage is low, it is 28% in the Netherlands, 22% in Germany and 15% in Denmark and the United Kingdom.

It is also worth noting that 11% of housewives are looking for employment (15% in Italy).

Employment rate: percentage of persons in employment out of the total population within the relevant age group. Employment is taken to mean working for at least one hour during the reference week.

Note concerning the methodology:

In certain graphs, the data relate to the small sub-samples. In this case, the percentages are given for guidance only.

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